What is the Practical Value of Non-Realism in Inter-religious Dialogue?

Peter Stribblehill investigates what the non-realist approach has to offer inter-religious dialogue. Two extracts from his MA dissertation.

1. Approaches to Non Reality by those of other Faiths

Before interviewing non-realists engaged in inter-religious dialogue Stribblehill looked at evidence of non-realism in other faiths besides his own Christian tradition.

I searched for relevant writings showing the attitudes of those from other faith backgrounds to non-realism. This has its difficulties as particularly the Eastern religions have very different models of God, so that to look at their attitude to non-realism may not be a question that they would identify with or understand in the same way as those from Abrahamic faiths.

Buddhism

Batchelor (2010)[1] tells of his training as a Bhikku, a monk in the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism, his growing unease with the supernatural element of their beliefs and eventual departure from his vows of ordination. At p40, we hear of his realisation that even if there is no life after death, then that would have no effect at all on his practice of the Dharma. He found a lack of comprehension

Buddhist monks debating in Tibet. Photo: wikipedia.org

among his teachers when he raised his doubts; although claiming to be open to doubt and questions, they thought his doubt meant that he had not meditated for long enough about the issues.

Back in Europe (p58) he studied philosophers, including Bultmann's ideas of demythologising Christianity, and pondered applying a similar process to Buddhism. In an echo of the work of the Jesus Seminar on Christianity, he searched for the original Buddha (p100 et seq). At p135, he describes the Buddha as a dissenter, a radical, an iconoclast who wanted nothing to do with the priestly religion of the Brahmins. There are parallels here with Cupitt. Batchelor at p182 refers to him, stating that 'I have a greater affinity with Don Cupitt than with any living Buddhist thinker.'

Hinduism

It is not difficult to find examples of the Hindu equivalent of non-realism. Sharma (2005, p16)[2] talks of the personal and impersonal aspects of God, giving rise to Vedantic Theism (personal) and Vedantic Absolutism (impersonal). He suggests that the two extremes tend to meet in modern Hinduism. Hart (1995, p82)[3] describes the concept of Brahman as 'Nirguna' (without qualities or attributes) and argues that this is 'remarkably close to the position described as non-realism.'

Sikhism

Chahal (2001, p13)[4] complains of misrepresentation of the original Sikhism message due to the literal understanding by many eighteenth and nineteenth century writings. He says that these are full of 'unauthentic, unscientific and illogical information.' They have been

imprinted on the minds of many as literally true. Citing specific examples, he says that they ignore the allegorical system in the writing of Guru Nanak. Chahal and Grewal (2006)[5] expand on this work, writing at p17 that Guru Nanak did not preach that the Vedas were literally true but rather that they contained truth. The metaphorical truths have been understood literally, which was contrary to the basic philosophy of Guru Nanak. God is inaccessible, ineffable, imperceptible and without form or feature. At p25, they point out that the Veda stories are not reconcilable to history or science. Whilst not being an explicitly non-realist proposition, it lays great emphasis on the non-literal interpretation of Sikh tradition.

Judaism

Cohn-Sherbok (2001, p30)[6] tells of two American-Jewish communities who reject the belief in a supernatural deity, whilst not being condemned by either Orthodox or non-Orthodox Jews. He cites Kaplan (1970), founder of the Deconstructionist movement as describing God as 'the sum of all the animating organising forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of the chaos'. To him, the Torah was not a record of God's dealing with his chosen people; rather it reflected the Jewish search for God. Cohn-Sherbok cites Wine (1985), founder of Humanistic Judaism, as regarding the traditional conception of Jewish history as mistaken, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob never existing as actual people and the Exodus account being a myth. Cohn-Sherbok postulates (2001, p36) that these branches of Judaism may be more accepted than their Christian counterparts, such as the Sea of Faith Network, because Judaism is seen as having an ethnic, as opposed to religious character.

Islam

Hart (1995 and 2006) suggests that the mystical Sufis have an approach consistent with non-realism. My literary review has not found evidence of a modern 'non-realist' Islam. It will be interesting to see whether modernisation of the religion changes this position in the future. Perhaps a more typical reaction is Shaha (2011)[7]

Jewish shofar (ram's horn) blown on Rosh HaShanah, the Jewish New Year.
Photo: wordpress.com

who describes himself as a humanist and atheist, brought up as a Moslem. At p196 he sees God as an inevitable part of human culture and says: 'But I have every hope that, with better education, greater freedom, and the same rights for everybody, humanity may eventually adopt a different take on religion.' This reflects a cautious optimism that there can be dialogue between his kind of Humanism and realist religions, including Islam.

The development of inter-religious thought

Space does not permit an exhaustive review of this subject so I must confine myself to looking at contributions which may be of some relevance to my project. Hans Küng (1997)[8] issued his famous response to the challenge of the clash of civilisations: 'There will be no peace between the civilisations without peace between the religions! And there will be no peace between the religions without a dialogue between the religions.'

He also added a less known statement in response to the polarisations between believers and non-believers. Often overlooked, perhaps this is the most important: 'There will be no survival of democracy without a coalition of believers and non-believers in mutual respect.'

I shall seek to argue that non-realists form a bridge between believers and non-believers and are well placed to form a link between them, seeing the value of religions whilst not going along with the traditional supernatural beliefs.

2. Non-realism in inter-religious dialogue

Stribblehill spoke with a range of non-realists who have been involved, sometimes for many years, in inter-religious dialogue. After talking with each of them about their personal position and practical experience, he asked them what advantages or disadvantages they found their non-realist beliefs brought to their inter-religious dialogue.

Taken individually the stories of my interviewees are perhaps unremarkable – just tales of quietly committed people 'getting on with getting on' with people of other faiths. However, their cumulative effect is, I suggest, good evidence of their success in the inter-religious field. By and large, they have not proclaimed (nor made a secret of) their non-realism; it has, rather, been part of their way of approaching others.

As will be seen below, they felt that it gave them a useful, different perspective on a number of issues. They tended to approach other faiths without thinking that they 'had the answer,' some problems just became non-issues.

A feeling of empathy

Many of the participants expressed their feeling of empathy towards all aspects of religions, A and B saying that an outsider learned best by 'keeping the ears and eyes open and the mouth shut.' For example, in a Hindu Temple the walls would have pictures which told stories; they would say that the story teaches us something, not that they were literally true.

A felt that as a non-realist he did not have the 'baggage' and worries that caused barriers to other ideas and faiths. It was not articulated but there was a feeling of being on the same wavelength. He had not been quizzed on his beliefs but found others intent on openness, not ticking boxes on beliefs before treating him as a human being. It was a matter of how you talked to people of other religions, having empathy and not enquiring further.

J perceived herself as being on a path, not at a destination. She was not a literalist but saw deities in different ways on different days. Her beliefs affected her approach to other faiths in that she sensed that anyone's path was valid for them. She was predisposed to respect what others believed (subject to some clearly bad practices).

As will be seen shortly, this feeling of empathy does not make non-realists into relativists.

A humility and lack of arrogance

This was stated explicitly by some, though I felt that the feeling came through implicitly with all participants.

For example, C said that as a non-realist there was also the motivation to have an inclusive understanding of what it meant to be human, including both science and myth using story and ritual fellowship. To see them all as human creations made them more important, not by saying that the only way of looking at it is that God exists and having right and wrong answers.

F felt that with other faiths, he learned and listened, seeking what they had in common. He did not believe in assimilation but also not in having ghettos for faith groups. Consensus rather than division was important.

H said that the non-realist approach meant that he felt lacking in arrogance in his approach to other faiths. There was a genuine sense that they were all equal; it was an accident of birth that they each had their own religion. He could be true to his own religion and not leave it behind. Others seemed to sense his openness; it would not be genuine if there was any arrogance. Pure Land Buddhism gave him an insight into where Christianity was coming from, not expecting to find answers.

Issues became non-issues

Some participants expressed this in some way but the following examples express the sentiments.

A and B questioned whether matters of belief were as central to those of other faiths as to Christians. It was not a Hindu idea to accept something credal. One could become a devotee of a guru, who would teach of attachment to one aspect of God but not entail believing anything in particular. This was contrasted with fear, especially among Christians, of the 'pick and mix' approach to religions, perhaps fearing heresy.

A suggested that Eastern religions had a better grasp of immanence, whereas Western religions tended to be hung up about transcendence (the other). For a non-realist, issues became non-issues; A and B both felt that there was not a parallel radicalism in other faiths.

C felt that with the non-realist approach some questions disappeared; it motivated interfaith dialogue in a valuable way. One could enter dialogue in a way that valued others and their ideas – creating faiths together. Interfaith dialogue was not about comparing beliefs; it worked as an open exploration, with empathy. The next stage was 'I can understand why what you believe is important to you,' not thinking that the other must be crazy to think in their way.

A new way of looking at things

A was saddened by the fact that the Christian/ Western world had little appreciation of what could be termed Indian Spirituality. In many ways the most sophisticated Hindus were non-realist already. He felt that Western culture had a different way of looking at what it means to be human from Eastern. Christians have a linear view of history. This was in contrast to the Oriental circular view of history. The West tended to use the left hemisphere of the brain and the East the right. Both were needed and valuable.

C suggested that much dialogue was on the basis of an assumption of monotheism, only including the Abrahamic faiths. He thought that non-realists opened the debate for people such as Hindus. He felt he was not trying to prove a particular faith, nor claiming that religions had a core in common. One reason for different religions was that they were asking different questions about different aspects of life. This extended understanding of what humanity was doing in the world, especially the West/East split.

D said that non-realists accepted that the idea of God had a use; faith members tended to think that the stories reflected something outside, as opposed to something inside. God was produced by the individual and shared between individuals but as a human creation. The idea of punishment and reward by God had been successful in building and maintaining empires but this was less possible in the modern world.

G thought an advantage of non-realism was that it made it easier to translate what people say. He could accept that ideas are manmade so his own version was less likely to be threatened by others. There was a lot of arrogance in Christian views. He had problems when God was referred to as a person; he saw a difference between the head and the heart where it was not always possible to translate. He once visited the Musée D'Orsay in Paris and saw a model of the Paris Opera House. Theatre was like religion, a performance. The church (Mosque, Temple) was very important to the performance as the setting for the ritual. What happens if we take the ritual out if its container? It wouldn't work. There was a simple step from ritual to God. There was a Jewish compulsion to repair the broken world but we can't repair it for ourselves, only for others. Israel's problem was that it was trying to fix it for themselves. And this would fail.

A SOF trustee (Meeting 23 March 2013) said that non-realists were asking questions, taking the whole metaphysical aspect out of the answers. This removed one possible area of disagreement, so that it was easier to look for agreement. There was a reference to the use of stories and myths. God is unreal but the stories are real and have importance. Most faiths had a mixture of the literal and the myth and it should be possible to live with this. There was a difference when religions claimed a privileged position which was not justified.

A feeling that 'bad religion' existed and should be challenged

The above themes should not be taken as an uncritical approach to other religions. There was a strong, recurring theme that the 'bad' in religion should be challenged. The challenge was to establish an open relationship where this could be done in friendship. To me, this is a better way of looking at it than by using the term 'relativism'. For example, A and B emphasised that their empathy did not make them 'relativists' who regarded all religions as equally valid. There were good and bad religious ideas and practices.

H thought that we still needed to get to the stage when we can talk to them about what they really believe. He felt that an interest in all

religions helped to deepen his understanding of his own. He recalled a meeting of an interfaith forum where there was a discussion on forced marriages. There were strong speeches on the issue but many well-known figures were absent from the meeting. A dialogue was needed with Moslems about the gay issue but the response seemed to be that there was no issue as they were all agreed on the point. We needed to open up discussion about issues such as these, disagreeing in friendship.

E reflected on this issue, looking at disadvantages of the non-realist approach, she thought some people were over-polite and non-confrontational but this was probably common to all such delicately balanced groups where members could all too easily inadvertently give offence to others by making an insensitive remark or asking an ill-judged question. Above all such groups are afraid of undoing dialogical progress made.

The question about practices which we found abhorrent was also raised by the SOF Trustees. I suggest that 'bad religion' exists across all faiths. Non-realism may assist here in labelling it as such from a perspective that also takes a particularly critical view of its own cultural background. It is a part of the problem in reaching consensus on a global ethic.[9]

NOTES

1. BATCHELOR, S. (2010) *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
2. SHARMA, A (2005) *Modern Hindu Thought*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
3. HART, D.A. (1995) *One Faith?* London: Mowbray.
4. CHAHAL, D. S. (2001) Causes of misrepresentation of Gurbani and Misrepresentation of Sikhism and the Solution. *Understanding Sikhism*, 3, (1/January-June), pp. 12-39.
5. CHAHAL, D. S. & GREWAL, V. S. (2006) Mythological References in Gurbani 1. Vedas and Yugas. *Understanding Sikhism,* 8 (1/January-June), pp. 15-26.
6. COHN-SHERBOK, D. (2001) The Jewish Island of Disbelief. In: WALLACE, T. et al (Eds.) *Time & Tide*. Guernsey: O Books pp. 30-37.
7. SHAHA, A. (2011) *The Young Atheists Handbook*. 2012 Edition, London: Biteback Publishing Ltd.
8. KÜNG, H. (1997) *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. Translated by John Bowden, London: SCM Press Ltd.
9. See for example KÜNG (1997).

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